

Institution: City, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: D:27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Legacies of Biafra: speaking the unspoken through curation and film, raising awareness across generations and ethnicities, memorialising war		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Louisa Uchum Egbunike	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: Sept 2017 – Sept 2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Looking at the precursors for the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-70), examining the war itself and considering its collective memory, 'Legacies of Biafra' takes a Janus-faced approach to history. Coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the war, Dr Louisa Egbunike's research centres Nigerian voices in a project encompassing a large-scale exhibition at the Brunei Gallery in London, feature-length documentary film, and public engagement events. 'Legacies of Biafra' has succeeded in opening conversations previously suppressed and expanding deeper understanding of the 'invisible genocide' against the Igbo people, not just within the Igbo community itself but outwardly across the global Nigerian community and the 12,000 exhibition visitors and film attendees in the UK, Ghana and Kenya.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>The Nigeria-Biafra war lasted three years, following Biafra's secession from Nigeria in 1967 in the wake of a pogrom against Igbo people. This historical episode is at the centre of Egbunike's research, which consists of intertwined academic and practice-based outputs. Her ongoing research (on themes including the Igbo-Nigerian literary tradition, the intersection of literary and historical narrative, and orality) engages critically with Nigerian cultural production stemming from the Nigeria-Biafra war, showcased not only in peer-reviewed publications [3.1, 3.2] but also through her roles as curator for the <i>Legacies of Biafra</i> exhibition and catalogue [3.3, 3.4] and as producer and co-writer of a documentary film with collaborator, director Nathan Richards, <i>In the Shadow of Biafra</i> [3.5]. A common thread which runs through Egbunike's publications, film and exhibition is a focus on writers and artists who have either directly or indirectly been impacted by the war.</p> <p>Egbunike's 2017 book chapter 'On Intertextual Conversations' [3.1] examines the literary work of Akachi Ezeigbo, a Nigeria-based writer who, whilst providing an important voice for her generation, has not received adequate scholarly attention. Ezeigbo's novel <i>The Last of the Strong Ones</i> charts the arrival and impact of British forces in what would become Eastern Nigeria. The colonial divide-and-rule policies set the stage for discontent amongst Nigeria's culturally and linguistically diverse peoples and pre-empted the civil war that would ensue in the decade following independence in 1960. The chapter considers the genre of the historical novel and explores the ways in which creative writers use their work to engage with traumatic moments in history. Egbunike is at the same time interested in literary traditions, and specifically examines the intertextual relationship in Akachi Ezeigbo's framing of colonial contact with the writing of her literary predecessor, Chinua Achebe. The chapter reads against the grain of existing scholarship on Ezeigbo's work as 'writing back' to Achebe and suggests instead that Ezeigbo's work is located in a constructive dialogue, grappling with this historical moment in the formation of Nigeria. In doing so, 'On Intertextual Conversations' [3.1] identifies a decolonial and intergenerational tradition of writing which centres 'the people's' narratives of traumatic periods in their collective past.</p>		

In the Shadow of Biafra [3.5] employs a similar framework to 'On Intertextual Conversations' [3.1] in so far as the documentary film is centred around intergenerational conversations amongst writers grappling with a period of conflict and trauma in Nigeria's history. The film's structure echoes that of a literary essay by engaging with the works and perspectives of creative writers who have written on the war; this is interspersed with critical contributions from academics who are scholars of war literature. Perspectives from third generation writers (since independence) such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Nnedi Okorafor are placed alongside the perspectives of second-generation writers such as Okey Ndibe and Akachi Ezeigbo, and first generation writers such as Chukwuemeka Ike. The film's editing process sought to generate new avenues for conversation by placing the perspectives of writers whose works were shaped by first-hand experiences of the war alongside works from a younger generation whose writing was heavily informed by the curated memories of others. The connection between Ezeigbo's engagement with Nigeria's colonial past in her novel *The Last of the Strong Ones*, and the Nigeria-Biafra conflict provided the foundations for Egbunike's interview with Ezeigbo in the documentary film [3.5].

In the curation of *Legacies of Biafra* [3.3], Egbunike sought to translate the conversations she had instigated in her literary scholarship into her curatorial practice. She selected works from four generations of artists (including an Uzo Egonu piece created in the 1970 and works by Obiora Udechukwu, created in the 1980s), exploring intertextual references across their works and placing a spotlight on intergenerational conversations in the wake of the conflict. These narrative threads were then further emphasised through Egbunike's wall text in the gallery. The exhibition catalogue [3.4] includes a series of academic essays and creative writing which draw on specific pieces from the exhibition or on the exhibition in its entirety as sources of inspiration. The collection was edited by Egbunike, who also provided the exhibition's scholarly underpinning in her introduction.

In her 2017 book chapter 'Narrating the Past', [3.2] Egbunike explores Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's concern with how historical narratives are constructed, whose perspective they present and what purpose they serve. Engaging with Adichie's war novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Egbunike suggests that the narrative asserts a reclamation of the people's history, having posed the question of who should tell the story of the Nigeria-Biafra war. The chapter presents the fluidity and flexibility of oral cultures as a counterpoint to the rigidity of colonial culture; it explores how Adichie incorporates references to orality as a way of demonstrating the active role that Igbo people (the largest ethnic group in Biafra) played in recording, transmitting and reimagining their collective past. The importance of centring Igbo perspectives on the war, as a way of giving voice to those who were victims of what Chima Korieh has called an 'invisible genocide', provided the foundation for both the exhibition and film. By its very nature, the documentary film centred oral accounts from a number of writers and scholars. Works by poet and performer Amarachi Attamah lamenting the devastation of Biafra were commissioned specifically by Egbunike; these works punctuated the discussion in the film and are firmly rooted in Igbo oral tradition.

In the conceptualisation of *In the Shadow of Biafra* [3.5], it was imperative to centre Nigerian voices, particularly those who had lived through the war or for whom the war featured prominently in their writing. Egbunike's interview with Adichie in the film [3.5] takes 'Narrating the Past' [3.2] as a starting point for developing a discussion around how oral histories informed the writing of her war novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In the film, Adichie relays the 'emotional truth' of her narrative which is rooted in the stories shared by her older relatives. Adichie's intellectual project of centring Nigerians in the recounting of their history informed the basis for Egbunike's curatorial approach to 'Legacies of Biafra' [3.3]. As curator, Egbunike drew her methodological approach from considerations of agency and perspective, and so the majority of content in the exhibition e.g. artwork, documentary films, music and books on the war were created by Nigerians from different ethnic groups. Given the centrality of oral cultures in Nigeria, Egbunike made a curatorial decision to include a listening post with testimonials from those who had lived through the war and Igbo choral music from the period. In doing so, the exhibition identified Nigerian people as active

agents in the formation and rethinking of the nation's history, rooting this assertion in the cultural practices of its peoples.

3. References to the research (maximum of six references)

3.1 Egbunike, L. (2017). 'On Intertextual Conversations: Images of the Igbo World in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*' in Sackeyfio, R.A. and Diala-Ogamba, B.(eds). *Emerging Perspectives on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo*. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 71–82. (peer reviewed)

3.2 Egbunike, L. (2017). 'Narrating the Past: Orality, History & the Production of Knowledge in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', in Emenyonu, E.(ed.) *A Companion to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. Suffolk: James Currey, pp.15-29. (peer-reviewed; lead chapter)

3.3 *An exhibition of artists' responses to Legacies of Biafra* (2018) [Exhibition]. The Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London. 11 January 2018 – 24 March 2018.

3.4 Egbunike, L.(ed.) (2017) *An exhibition of artists' responses to Legacies of Biafra*. [Catalogue accompanying an exhibition held at The Brunei Gallery, SOAS, 11 January 2018 – 24 March 2018] United Kingdom: Nigeria Art Society. ISBN: 978-0-9930659-9-6.

3.5 *In the Shadow of Biafra*. (2020). [BBFC classification AFF383153]. Directed by Nathan Richards. England: Louisa Egbunike. First screening, 25/01/2020, Curzon Bloomsbury, London. Available on <https://vimeo.com/539409906/4fdfa35f0a>.

4. Details of the impact

Concurrent to the *Legacies of Biafra* exhibition held at the Brunei Gallery in London, which opened with a lecture delivered by Booker Prize-winning novelist Ben Okri, Egbunike worked in close collaboration with filmmaker Nathan Richards to create a documentary in order to engage with a cinema-loving audience that might not necessarily visit museums and galleries. *In the Shadow of Biafra* [3.5], a 73-minute feature film showcasing some of Nigeria's most prominent literary figures, had multiple preview screenings in the UK, Ghana and Kenya involving post-screening Q&A feedback sessions, and premiered on the 25th of January, 2020 at Curzon Bloomsbury on the Renoir screen before a full-capacity (148 seats) audience. Combined, the exhibition and film have raised and improved awareness of the Biafran war to a global audience of more than 12,000 visitors and attendees [5.1] and prompted the Office of the Vice-President of Nigeria to write to Egbunike, requesting connections and memorabilia because "*although the Biafran War was far from a highpoint in [Nigerian] history, we cannot fully deliberate on where we currently are as a nation without talking about it.*" [5.2]

Speaking the unspoken through curation and film

Egbunike's research contributes to the untangling of complex histories, which in turn contributes to understanding the challenges of the future. As she notes in the catalogue's introduction, the conversation about Biafra and its legacies is a difficult one. [3.4] Through the work of 15 artists, the story of the war unfolds, leaving many visitors "*speechless and crying.*" One exhibition visitor from Florida in the US commented "*...it is relevant to the world today—[memories] make this unforgettable*" and others were affected similarly [5.3]: "*Spread the story—the world will know our struggle.*" "*Thanks for opening my eyes to Biafra...it has hit me very hard.*" "*Very informative, beautiful pieces that express the feeling of the horrors experienced. Thanks for aiding human awareness and understanding.*" "*This has been very insightful. What surprises me though is the fact that nothing has changed. I wonder when we will ever learn.*" "*Informative, beautiful and moving.*"

"Thank you for bringing to life child migrant stories."

"[This exhibition] has allowed me to connect with my country in a new way."

The Head of Galleries & Exhibitions of SOAS expressed how *Legacies of Biafra* is one of the Brunei Gallery's most successful African-related exhibitions and events programme to date: "... while also engaging with the Nigerian community there was a change in visitors' awareness and understanding of this crucial point in Nigeria's political history discovered by a new audience" and they stated how the accompanying exhibition catalogue [3.4] (of which approximately 800 copies were sold) [5.4], "has continued to be an essential resource to our users and students studying this period of Nigeria's history." [5.1] Visitors were not the only ones who benefitted from Egbunike as curator; the artists themselves have shared the positive impacts of their involvement in the exhibition. Titus Agbara writes how this experience changed his practice as an impressionist oil painter: "Louisa's vision in curating the legacy of Biafra exhibition has widened my scope of study, reflecting to where it all began as in reminiscing on the very place of our origin...I confess my inner-self. Now my expression in both art and emotion is boldly tackled in any medium without restriction or limitations...To crown it all, it has been a stimulus to other Biafra related subjects, which have been under the carpet due to fear of the unknown, politically and socially. The bold representations and outcry geared up by the curator has been an emancipation to others." [5.4] The exhibition has helped artist Imoesi Imhonigie reach a larger audience "as people from all over the world have seen the exhibition and [he has] been contacted through [his] social media outfit by lots of art lovers who saw the exhibition, and who want to know more about [him] and [his] art" [5.4] whereas for ceramicist and painter, Toni Ndikanwu, being involved has been a "revelation in terms of the amount of information that came out of the process" and cites Egbunike for helping him clarify his focus on how to portray the conflict. [5.4] Writing on behalf of members of NASUK (Nigeria Art Society UK), the founder describes how Egbunike's research "created a space for dialogue, combating the silence around the war" and "generating understanding and tolerance" within the NASUK collective as well as the wider Nigerian community. [5.4]

Egbunike's documentary, *In the Shadow of Biafra*, reveals poignant, sometimes repressed, recollections of the conflict through highlighted conversations, including an interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie speaks to the audience, reminding us "we must remember, and we must remember with dignity, the people who died. We must remember what they stood for and we must give up its value and its due because these are the people who were standing up for justice." [3.5 film timestamp 1:10:17]

Memorialisation and raising awareness across different generations and ethnicities

Egbunike's approach to the Nigeria-Biafra conflict breaks away from the dominant discourse which focusses on the overt political dimensions of the war. Instead, in choosing to portray the conflict through the voices of writers and artists, she has been able to generate a conversation about how the war is remembered, using the arts as a mode of exploration and healing. Some of the visitors to the exhibition shared their reactions [5.3] to the multi-media on display:

"Memories rushed back as if they happened some months ago..."

"Beautiful work and collection. Let us not forget."

"Thanks for the reminders and education offered by this exhibition...Biafra has affected the DNA of the Igbos and we will carry its memories and lessons forever. Perhaps you have helped others understand."

"I was in the Biafran story. I was 7 years old when the war began. We suffered. I came here [to the exhibition] with my son who has been empowered and enlightened more on his mother's experience as a child."

"I am speechless by the history I never knew, the beauty and pain in the art."

"Eye opening, beautifully evocative and made me think of parallels to Ireland (civil war, famine, British rule)."

"I feel inspired even as a South Asian Bengali to document my own history and use of colonial strategies...."

"Very beautiful and well put together exhibition. As someone whose father lost two brothers and a cousin whose grandfather fought for Biafra, I feel as though these works can create the correct dialogue to heal the wounds of the past and make sure we as Nigerians don't make the same mistake again."

Filmgoers of varying ages who attended the premiere were asked to share how they had been inspired to think differently about Biafra and its broader meaning through feedback cards. From the 73 responses of the 148 attendees, a Dutch-Ghanaian student of African politics (aged 18-24) commented on the *"distance between these happenings"* and himself and how, *"when studying and/or reading about things, you forget the actual people behind it."* [5.5] Another attendee (aged 40-60) shared their before and after thoughts on how the documentary altered their perception of the conflict from *"I don't know enough about Biafra, the context in which the Biafran war came about, or its legacy"* to *"I understand it more now as a utopian vision and a response to injustice and a chapter in Nigerian history which hasn't ended..."* [5.5]

Furthermore, Egbunike's research has also contributed to the commemoration of the Biafran war through theatre. Over the years, Nigerian playwright Inua Ellams and Egbunike have conversed about the war and how it has been engaged with privately rather than publicly, which culminated in Ellams being interviewed by Egbunike for *In The Shadow of Biafra*. Egbunike was invited by Ellams to consult on his adaptation of Chekhov's play, *Three Sisters*, set in Biafra, which premiered at the National Theatre in December 2019. Ellams drew on Egbunike's expertise on Igbo culture to help construct and develop the play's socio-cultural setting. Based on this engagement, Ellams credits Egbunike as having been *"extensively important to staging Three Sisters."* [5.6]

Reviewing 'Legacies of Biafra' for *Africa Arts*, Will Rea reflects that the exhibition, *"in its movement backward and forward across time and between despair and hope, shows the way in which an intergenerational dialogue has developed that rethinking—and stands not only as legacy, but also as testament."* [5.7] Together, the film and the exhibition highlight the importance of the arts in documenting and exposing conflict; Egbunike's contribution has foregrounded the role of the creative arts in mediating public awareness and collective memory.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 email from the Head of Galleries & Exhibitions, SOAS
- 5.2 email from the Office of the Vice-President of Nigeria
- 5.3 visitor comments book on *An exhibition of artist's responses to the Legacies of Biafra*
- 5.4 testimonials from the Founder and three artists of Nigeria Art Society UK (NASUK)
- 5.5 analysis/collated film feedback from the Curzon Theatre screening, Bloomsbury 25.01.20 (original cards available upon request)
- 5.6 email from Nigerian playwright Inua Ellams
- 5.7 Rea, W. (2020). 'Legacies of Biafra' guest curator Louisa Egbunike, Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, January 11 – March 24, 2018 (review). *African Arts*, 53 (1), pp. 82-84.